

How to Survive Parenting - Discipline and the Early Years

By Mike Witzky

This article was one of a series from a newspaper column is entitled “*When Life Hurts*” and why I have chosen to discuss issues related to raising children. As much as I wish that what I am about to say wasn’t true – it is. Every reader and every person lining will have occasions in their lives when life hurts. Through most of these times, we will find the support we need from those around us. At times, we will seek outside help, but none of us will avoid this. Raising healthy children is the most important thing most of us will ever do in our lives and we need to do it right. While none of is perfect, there are things we can do and learn that will help.

In previous articles I have given the following advice: To mothers - Postpartum depression is very common as a new mother’s hormones rebalance but if it goes on too long or is too severe tell your doctor because there are many affective treatments. To fathers – Tell your babies that you love them. Say it out loud (in private if necessary at first, then practice it in front of others). Men have more trouble with this than women but it is so important for fathers to be able to say, “*I love you*” and begin early. This will make it so much easier when the children get older.

I am writing about discipline at this point in my series of articles because, learning and practicing effective forms of discipline must start early and can have a tremendous impact (positive or negative) on your child. It is also very important to know that a parent’s method of discipline is different at each stage of the child’s development. Think about it, you would never tell your 10 month old that they are grounded from watching their favorite TV show because they spilled their cereal for the umpteenth time. Why – because at that stage, the baby hasn’t developed the ability to link the two events in any way. On the other hand, you might want to take the bowl away from the baby telling her that she will get this back if she doesn’t spill. Of course, we all know what will happen don’t we? We will need to repeat our instructions over and over again to our children so they will learn.

There are many tools that parents can learn that will enable them to effectively instruct and discipline their children. Let’s get this out early. Corporal or physical punishment should be way down on your list of tools for discipline. There are so many other forms of discipline that work so much better that do not do the damage (both physical and emotional) that physical punishment does. When we look carefully at the purpose of discipline, we can see that in the early years there is a big difference between discipline and punishment. Punishment is having to pay a penalty for a wrong. There is a notion of it having to hurt in some way to be effective. Discipline has a totally different meaning in that the goal is not to hurt but to instruct. Instruction, in one form or another, is what parenting is all about.

What type of discipline should be used during the first two years of a baby’s life. Very little discipline is needed during the first year, but a lot of instruction is going on. I have an eleven-month-old grandson (Ian – my first). For several weeks now we have been playing this game where he uses his hand to push my chin. Of course I make a big deal of it like he’s giving me an uppercut to the jaw. While we have great fun with this his mother was none too pleased when he took a swing at her. She informed me that she didn’t want him doing that and if he did it again I was suppose to tell him no and put him down. What a great way to discipline him so he can learn what his mother wants. Think if we were to have slapped his hand instead. He would have gotten the message and

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maybe quicker than in the other method, but think what we would be teaching. First, Ian had no malicious intent in his action only a way to play with grandpa. Therefore, the notion of needing to punish for wrongdoing is totally inaccurate, while instruction on the action not being acceptable is the correct response. Second, wouldn't it be significantly inconsistent to slap the baby for hitting. That teaches that it is okay for me to hit you because I am bigger, and sets the stage for hitting as a technique to get your own way. Between the baby's first year and second there will be many more opportunities to correct the baby. They are much more mobile and into everything. The key is to remember that for the most part their intent is not malicious and can be corrected by consistent instruction.

If you think your child may benefit from professional assistance, please go to the "*Find a Service Provider*" section of the BHG Web site <http://www.bhg.org> to locate a behavioral healthcare agency in your county.

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